
MICROCONTENT PATTERNS IN A BULGARIAN BEAUTY VLOG: A CASE STUDY OF BORYANA STEFANOVA'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL

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Abstract: The hegemony of New Media seems undeniable as the majority of young people (the so-called “Generation Z” and the Millennial demographic) give preference to these computer-mediated means of communication and/or entertainment rather over traditional media modes (such as television, radio and the printed press, for example). In this sense, YouTube as a platform for sharing video content has become fertile ground for the creation of qualitatively new types of content grouped into ever-changing and multiplying genres and types of videos. In the process, the platform has evolved into a unique ecosystem with its own communities, codes and participant roles. The significant purchasing force of the aforementioned generational groups along with their marked interest in makeup and cosmetics have been recognized by beauty and cosmetics companies and their marketing departments, gradually leading to the emergence of the so-called “beauty community” - one of the most powerful both in terms of social recognition and potential for generating profit. It is a gathering ground for renowned “beauty gurus”, aspiring beauty “vloggers” and millions of obsessed subscribers forming an extremely demanding and competitive hierarchical structure.

By definition, a “beauty vlogger” is a person who creates and posts YouTube videos about fashion, hair-styling, cosmetics and other beauty-related topics. Within the current reality of globalization and with the leading influence of the US in terms of media and entertainment and their utilization for marketing purposes, US-originating pop-culture trends quickly spread around the world and proliferate in the form of “glocalized”, imitative, emulative versions of their English-language, American originals. In the case of YouTube videos and their creators this can be very clearly observed as the “beauty vlogger” occupation has found its followers in developing countries, including Bulgaria, giving rise to seemingly “new” and “original” content in a new language which is, however, extremely derivative and imitative in its nature, following established formats and genres of video content - including the patterns for the accompanying microcontent (video titles).

The present study is focused on the type and frequency of use of microcontent patterns in video titles as employed by Bulgarian beauty vlogger Boryana Stefanova on her YouTube channel. Of particular interest will be a) whether the titles can be grouped into clearly defined patterns of basic constant elements and empty slots to be filled with variables (thus producing specific title occurrences of a particular pattern), and b) the extent to which the employed patterns follow the guidelines set by experts in the field of creating content for digital audiences.

Keywords: YouTube titles, Bulgarian beauty vlogger, microcontent patterns

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1. INTRODUCTION

The YouTube video-sharing website is currently accessible in over 100 countries and 80 different languages with over two billion users (YouTube, 2020). The platform categorizes videos into different categories, the most popular of them according to Social Blade being Autos and Vehicles, Comedy, Education, Entertainment, Film, Gaming, Science and Technology, Shows, How to & Style, Music, News and Politics, Nonprofit & Activism, People & Blogs, Pets & Animals, Sports, and Travel (Social Blade, 2020). These categories help viewers to find particular video easier and enable advertisers and video creators to have a common vocabulary and understanding of each audience's needs (Collins, Conley, 2019).

2. CASE STUDY

As of May 2019, the influencer marketing agency Mediakix (Mediakix, 2020) lists the 16 most popular types of YouTube videos to include Commentary videos (vlogs and conspiracies); Product Review videos (unboxings); How-to/Tutorial videos; Top List videos (a.k.a. listicles - hauls, favorites/best of, collection and compilation videos); Comedy videos (skits, pranks, parodies); Challenge videos (memes); Reaction videos; Q&A videos; Interviews; Docuseries; Educational videos; Music videos; Narrative videos (stories, explainers); Gaming videos; ASMR videos; Sport videos (trick shot videos).

Similarly to the categories and types of channels and their videos in terms of content, there have been created categories and types of microcontent (video titles) corresponding to each of these specific types of videos. These common types of titles exist in the form of patterns for creating specific title occurrences. These patterns have specific structures containing a set of constant elements serving as the basis of the patterns combined with empty “slots” to be filled with different elements to create a specific occurrence of the pattern - a specific title. Finberg (2011) attributes the tendency for microcontent to share similar structures (i.e. to employ patterns in the creation of titles) partly to the efforts of online media to keep up with the pressures of the information cycle online which results in many websites having “template-driven publishing systems” with “little flexibility”.

There are a number of different classifications of microcontent patterns based on research which use different criteria. Morrow (2012) proposes a mixed-criterion classification which is partly based on the general idea or effect which the title creates and partly on the structure and repetitive elements. His categories include threat headlines (focusing on fears and warning about threats), “zen” headlines (promising to make the users’ life easier and solve their problems), “piggyback” headlines (employing the names of famous brands or people), mistake headlines (focusing on possible or common mistakes), “how-to” headlines (including practical advice and instructions), list headlines (offering a specific number of options to the user to choose from).

Another mixed-criterion typology (Bly, 2005) proposes 8 kinds of headlines, including “direct” headlines (statements with no hidden meanings or wordplay), “indirect” headlines (making a statement in a roundabout way designed to arouse interest), “news” headlines (announcing news about a subject), “how-to” headlines (offering advice and explanation), “question” headlines (asking a question with which the user can empathize with), “command” headlines (with a strong verb in the beginning demanding action from the user), “reason-why” headlines (signaling a list of features, similar to Morrow’s category of list headlines), “testimonial” headlines (using a quote from a user to indicate legitimacy and being real).

The present paper, however, will compare the results from the corpus analysis of the titles on Boryana Stefanova’s channel to the results from a study by Conductor (Safran, 2013), which isolated “the five general ways in which headlines are written”. The five “high-level headline types” include “Normal” (declarative statement) structure, question, “How to” structure, structure featuring a number and, finally, a reader-addressing structure (ibid.). When ordered according to users’ preferences, these headlines achieved scores which established the “number” structure as the most popular among successful headlines (36 %), followed by the reader-addressing structure (21 %), the “How to” structure (17 %), the “normal” structure (15 %) and finally, in last place, the question with 11 %.

In addition to establishing typologies, experts in the field of SEO and writing for the web have proposed tips and strategies for formulating and structuring titles online. They recognize the crucial role of microcontent online for ensuring content visibility and propose to write titles which include the following characteristics: selecting and using strong and relevant keywords by placing them at the beginning of the title and thus creating a front-loaded title; using title case (capitalizing every content word in the title) or uppercase (using all caps throughout the title); including lists and numbers in the form of digits; limiting the number of characters to under 60 (in some sources, 66 or 70) characters including the spaces; using “How to” in the title (Baird, Sehl, 2020; Becker, 2019; Bedrina, 2020; Lockwood, 2018; Velumani, 2020).

Thus, in addition to establishing what types of videos are the most common on the Bulgarian channel and comparing the results with the findings from research on American channels of the same type (i.e., of the “beauty and fashion” category on YouTube), we will also be able to establish the corresponding tendencies in creating the microcontent which accompanies such video content.

The case study focuses on the Boryana Stefanova YouTube channel and the content uploaded to that channel up to September, 2020. The analysis is based on the previously collected instances of microcontent from the channel until 2019 (Stoycheva, 2019) and additional microcontent collected by the author of the current paper until September 2020 in the form of a list.

In terms of the types of videos featured, the Boryana Stefanova channel shows a definitive preference for videos of the How-to/ Tutorial type, of which there are 110 out of the total of 224 videos. This category is followed by Product Review/Unboxing videos (41), Commentary/Blog videos (36), Toplist/Haul/Favorites videos (13), Challenge videos (11), Q&A videos (8) and finally, Reaction videos (5). There is a substantial difference in the quantity of videos within the first 3 categories and those in the next 4 categories. However, the Bulgarian channel seems to be following the trends established by the aforementioned Mediakix research as all the videos on the channel pertain to a category among the 16 most popular ones.

The analysis and categorization of the items of text-based microcontent (i.e. the video titles) yields the following groupings of microcontent utilized on Boryana Stefanova’s channel:

- the most commonly used title type (170 instances) is a fragment instead of a clause/sentence, does not contain a verb but is instead centered around a keyword (usually the noun “Грим”/ “makeup”) to which are added

various descriptive elements; in some cases the descriptives include adjectives pertaining to the quality or colour of the makeup - “Драматичен "отворен" CUT CREASE грим”/ “Dramatic, ‘open’ CUT CREASE makeup” and “Ежедневен бронзов грим с ярко червило”/ “Everyday bronze makeup with a bright lipstick”; in other cases the type of makeup is described based on a co-text pertaining to the situation/event/occasion of its usage - “Черен вечерен грим с изкуствени мигли”/ “Black evening makeup with false eyelashes”;

- relatively common use of questions (both direct and indirect/rhetorical ones, probably used for effect) and question marks/a combination of question marks and exclamation marks - used in 44 titles; for instance, “Четки за грим?! Коя за какво е?!”/ “Makeup brushes?! Which one is used for what?!” (here and in all examples to follow translation is mine);
- similarly common use of numbers (in 43 titles), such as in “3 любими за 3 минути”/ “3 favorites in 3 minutes”;
- less common use of declarative sentences actually containing a predicate (30 cases), as in “ОПИТАХ СЕ ДА СЕ ГРИМИРАМ КАТО НИККИЕТUTORIALS”/ “I TRIED TO PUT ON MY MAKEUP LIKE NIKKIETUTORIALS”;
- not a very common use of the “How (to)”/ “Как (да)” structure (only 15 instances) - for example, “Как да се гримираме с пръсти”/ “How to put on our makeup with our fingers”;
- even fewer cases of reader-addressing titles (11 in number); for example, “Въпроси и отговори-опознайте ме по-добре! 5000 АБОНАТИ!”/ “Questions and answers - get to know me better! 5000 SUBSCRIBERS!”;

In terms of the use of patterns with constant and variable elements, the channel shows a preference for using the following repetitively, which results in the creation of series:

- the pattern “ГРИМ В (ЦВЯТ)/ ЗА (ЦВЯТ НА ОЧИТЕ/ СЪБИТИЕ)”/ “MAKEUP IN (colour)/ FOR (eye colour/occasion)” - a specifically interesting case of use of a repetitive pattern here is the series “Гримът на звездите”/ “The makeup of the stars” with 11 different instances; for example, “Гримът на звездите * Cardi B - I like it”/ “The makeup of the stars * Cardi B - I like it”;
- the pattern “ЦЯЛОСТЕН ГРИМ С НОВИ ПРОДУКТИ” / “FULL FACE OF NEW MAKEUP PRODUCTS”;
- the pattern “ПЪРВИ ВПЕЧАТЛЕНИЯ от палитра на”/ “FIRST IMPRESSIONS from the ... palette”;
- the pattern “Мини мнения #”/ “Mini reviews #”;
- the pattern “Pinks Beauty Box разопаковане (дата)”/ “Pinks Beauty Box unboxing (date)”;
- the pattern “ГРИМЪОР РЕАГИРА НА”/ “MAKEUP ARTIST REACTS TO”;
- the pattern “Въпроси и отговори #”/ “Questions and answers #”;
- the pattern “Празни опаковки # | Ревю на продукти, които съм използвала до край! | Empties”/ “Empties # | Review of products which I have used up!”;
- the pattern “3 любими за 3 минути”/ “3 favourites in 3 minutes”;
- the pattern “Пригответи се с мен”/ “Get ready with me”.

3. CONCLUSION

The present article focused on studying the extent to which the Bulgarian YouTube makeup and beauty channel “Boryana Stefanova” is influenced by and follows the established trends for creating YouTube content and its respective microcontent. The analysis of the quantitative results shows definitively that the Bulgarian YouTuber is indeed part of the Beauty Community and is well aware of the trends and the type of content users of such channels are interested in. Therefore, the choice of types of videos on the channel as well as the types of titles used and their structures are to a large extent consistent with the original, American prototypes of the Bulgarian channel. In this sense, the channel is very much derivative and imitative in terms of the types of content, but also is undeniably unique due to language- and culture- specific characteristics - which would hopefully make this article a useful contribution in terms of establishing the place of the language of Bulgarian New Media and YouTube microcontent in particular on the world map.

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